

THE REALITY OF SPORT AND RECREATION PARTNERSHIPS

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Introduction

Over the last decade, local governments have experienced political, economic and social pressures to relinquish traditional ways of operating in favour of more strategic approaches of doing business (Thibault, Frisby & Kikulis, 1999). Fiscal constraints, coupled with the increasing expectations by community members for the continued provision of quality sport and recreation programs and facilities, have contributed to the growing acceptance of partnerships among local governments within different sectors. In addition to practitioners recognizing the importance of partnerships, researchers are dedicating resources to the examination of partnerships. For instance, Selin and Chavez (1994) used a multiple case study to identify successful tourism partnerships while Andereck (1997) measured both the effectiveness and the constraints associated with partnerships. Partnerships can be conceptualized as voluntary linkages, consisting of two or more parties, involving the exchange of various resources, common goals, an on-going relationship and future interest in working together (Yoder & Ham, 1999).

The Regional Municipality of Niagara in Ontario is not immune from pressures to maintain or improve the delivery of recreation programs and facilities with fewer financial resources. While anecdotal evidence of relationships between local governments including YMCAs, and Boards of Education is abundant, empirical evidence regarding the strength, patterns, resources and values involved in these partnerships has yet to be gathered. Given this, the Regional Municipality of Niagara, which is comprised of 12 local governments, provides fruitful ground to explore the nature of partnerships between municipalities and public, not-for-profit and private sector organizations. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to identify the nature of partnerships used by two local governments within the Niagara Region, and to analyze these partnerships according to four key dimensions; strength of ties, inter-organizational patterns, financial and human resources, and values/beliefs.

Analytical Themes

The strength of ties between organizations is associated with a heightened level of integration between actors, and typically characterized by time-intensive linkages which serve multiple purposes and/or involve significant resources (Stern, 1979). The patterns of strong and weak ties that existed among a collection of organizations provided insight into the structure of these relationships. Relationships between actors may involve resources such as personnel, finances, facilities, equipment or information (Knoke & Kuklinski, 1991). The values (normative) and beliefs (cognitive) dimension of research of inter-organizational relationships gained prominence given the importance of the institutional environment of in which actors are embedded (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). The tensions created when partners, for example local governments and private sector firms, entered into relationships have been cited by Thibault, Frisby & Kikulis (2002) as a factor that creates both challenges and concern for involved organizations.

Method

Exploring the strength, patterns, resources, and values of local government partnerships that are associated with delivery of sport and recreation required an inductive approach. Data collection for this research involved primary and secondary sources and was conducted in accordance with the key analytical dimensions identified in the purpose and objectives of this research. First, a content analysis of documents from an array of secondary sources (recreation master plans, community leisure guides, and CURA youth lifestyles research) enabled us to uncover insight into the policies of local governments towards partnerships, the partnerships that exist to deliver programs or facilities, and the factors that contributed to the partnerships. According to Glesne (1999), a researchers' understanding of a particular phenomenon expands when documents are used. Second, the collection of data from in-depth interviews provided opportunities to explore the strength of partnerships, the various patterns of relationships that existed, the type and amount of resources dedicated to partnerships, and the values and beliefs that underpinned these relationships. Twelve interviews with managers responsible for the provision of sport and recreation for the two municipalities sampled in this study were conducted. Interviews had the advantage of providing researchers with an opportunity to explore alternative explanations found in earlier phases of document analysis (Glense). The data were then transcribed and integrated into Nud*ist, a qualitative software program designed to manage qualitative data by identifying codes, patterns and relationships in data (Prien, Kelle, & Bird, 1998). In keeping with this approach to data analysis, multi-level and pattern coding was used to label and discern among the themes uncovered in the data (Loftland & Loftland, 1995). The relationships among concepts uncovered in the data were made visible through coding and the retrieval of data sources was facilitated by this software.

Results

The first municipality (Municipality A) in which data were collected was a small (18,000) city which lacked a public recreation and park department to deliver sport and recreation programs. Interestingly, the recreation and sport delivery responsibility in this community primarily fell into the hands of several non-profit organizations. The second municipality (Municipality B) included in this study was larger in size (75,000) with an established recreation and park department. The analyses of the data revealed three main themes related to partnerships. The primary theme was a lack of consistent terminology for partnerships. This is reflective of the academic literature (Yoder & Ham, 1999). This was apparent not only between the two municipalities involved in the study, but also within the same organization. For instance, the following are two definitions of partnerships as suggested by individuals within the same organization:

“My vision of a partnership is of groups obviously working together to eventually involve in an event that’s successful” and “Well, I think of a partnership as two or more groups that are bringing something to the table to achieve a common goal, although the subgoals within that might be slightly different but there is some common goal that they’re trying to achieve”.

Another theme that emerged throughout the analyses of the data was a distrust of partnerships in general as well as with other government organizations. All persons

involved in this research recognized the importance and necessity of partnerships in an economically challenged environment and yet there was still caution by senior managers in stating the extent to which the partnerships were successful. For example, the following sentiment was expressed by different individuals in both municipalities throughout this study when asked about partnerships in general: “The problem with all partnerships is it’s a legal agreement and it’s written in stone, but not only can it be broken, there’s always loopholes in there,...and so how do you protect yourself from changing circumstances?” As well, when further asked to discuss this issue, a lack of trust between municipalities seemed apparent. For example, one individual made the following statement: “I know we’re in Regional Niagara, but we don’t see that there’s a lot of interrelation between municipalities. It’s kind of a them against us sort of idea”. A third theme that emerged from this data was a lack of process used to guide the partnership. This lack of strategic process was evident in both the initiation and monitoring and evaluation of partnerships. For example, when individuals were asked to discuss the ways in which a partnership agreement began, a pattern of informality appeared. For example, one individual stated the following: “we don’t initiate partnerships, we sit back and wait for those partnerships to come to us symbolically”. Another individual stated “they’re consistent in that if the chamber needs something, they can call us. If we need something, we call them”.

This lack of process also extends into the evaluation of partnerships. In many cases, there were a great deal of resources incorporated into the maintenance of a partnership and yet there was no formal (or even informal) method for determining whether the partnership had achieved its goals. For instance, one individual said the following when asked whether evaluation was part of the process: “There’s not really any checking up to see how they’re doing throughout the year. So far, we have never had a problem or issue, so we’ve been very lucky”.

Discussion & Practical Implications

In an effort to advance the literature on partnerships, it is imperative to begin identifying and quantifying what is actually meant by a “partnership”. This study revealed that practitioners, from whom we want partnership information to reach, all approach/define/perceive partnerships differently. This lack of consistent terminology is a detriment to the field. And, even though a lack of trust is inevitable when partnerships are in the early stages (Yoder & Ham, 1999), a proactive approach by all involved parties could alleviate the lack of trust between new partners to some degree. Finally, the fact that a strategic process does not initiate or guide partnerships in either of the municipalities studied with this research is of great concern. Partnerships have the potential to aid in the delivery of sport and recreation and need to be managed in the same manner as volunteers, financial and programming strategies. In an effort to bridge the gap between theory and practice, a “fact sheet” was provided to the municipalities in this study suggesting some steps to be taken to better manage current and future partnerships. This study has important implications for the study and practice of community partnerships, providing rich data and recommendations for successfully creating, managing and maximizing efficiencies regarding the delivery of recreation programs and facilities for regional communities.

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